

Integrating content-based language learning and intercultural learning online: An international eGroups collaboration

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Abstract

Learning language through content in the tertiary context presents a challenge in that language teachers, particularly in EAP/ESP contexts, are not necessarily experts in their students' speciality subject areas, while subject experts might lack language teaching methodology. Furthermore, intercultural awareness, a key qualification in today's global work environment, tends to take a back seat in a content-based approach. This paper reports on a didactic concept which integrates subject-based language learning with intercultural experience through online collaboration in an international eGroups set-up. The creation of a collaborative learning space aimed to bring together learners from different cultural contexts (New Zealand and Germany) and with different target languages (German and English) towards shared learning outcomes. Data from student interactions will help illustrate to what extent the eGroups model promoted interactive, communicative and intercultural competence through content-related bilingual collaboration.

Background

Today's university graduates are expected to function in an increasingly international and culturally diverse job market. Accordingly, the challenges of globalisation have put new demands on universities as to how they achieve internationalisation. Internationalisation strategies exist both in the European context, where internationally recognised courses are required under the European Bologna Declaration, and in New Zealand, where internationalisation constitutes a strategic goal in the tertiary context. Given these macro challenges, the question arises as to how students might be equipped not only with the relevant job-related skills but also with key competencies which labour markets increasingly demand. These include excellent communication skills in English and increasingly other languages, as well as intercultural communication skills and the ability to cope with the complexities of diversity in the workplace. Against this background, language

learning plays a central role in preparing students for some of these challenging demands.

Problem

Learning a language – whether for general, academic or specific purposes – aims to develop linguistic proficiency and ideally intercultural awareness. But this might be difficult where the focus is on form, and students might opt to study a dedicated course on intercultural communication. However, these content papers tend to offer little opportunity to interact across cultures. The crucial question that arises is: how can linguistic, cultural and content-related learning be integrated into university education, considering limitations in resources, time and space? In particular, who can teach the complex range of skills: a content expert familiar with the specific concepts and contexts in which the language is to be applied (Bell, 1996)? Or would it be a language expert, who has pedagogical expertise, to deal with individual needs, give specific and constructive feedback, especially at very advanced levels (Stryker & Leaver, Eds., 1997). Furthermore, would this person also have the necessary cultural and intercultural expertise? Matters are further complicated by issues raised in the native speaker debate. While the ideal native speaker concept has been revealed as an idealised myth (Davies, A., 2003), the view persists that only first language speakers can actually teach their language effectively (Alptekin 2002: 59; Medgyes 1992).

Davies, S. (2003) suggests that a content-based approach to learning offers a useful strategy for supporting the learner especially in subject-related language skills, although it may not necessarily result in increased intercultural competence. Integrating content with language learning, and SLA principles emphasising interaction and intercultural collaborative learning, might tackle this challenge.

There may be few educators who possess all these areas of expertise. Instead it may be more fruitful to discuss questions of instructional design as a way to help learners develop communicative and intercultural competence as well as content knowledge. Anderson (2000, p. 99) believes that to meet students' significant lifelong learning needs, particularly in distance education contexts, 'the only way to gain economy of scale is to dissociate the direct link between learning-teaching and content expertise'. eGroups represent an instructional design where teachers become facilitators and scaffold interactive and collaborative learning activities through content.

In this paper, we suggest that a pedagogy which promotes learner collaboration provides an alternative approach to developing content-related language while at the same time fostering intercultural awareness. We explore an international 'eGroups' project to illustrate how some of the expertise traditionally associated with teachers is shifted to and emerges from students themselves. Thanks to the international virtual context, the eGroups concept helps students develop not only micro skills but

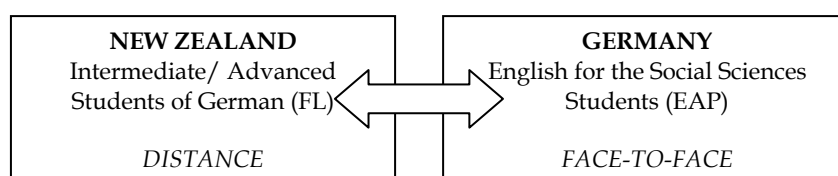
also intercultural awareness and interactive competence allowing for developing the competence of life-long learning.

eGroups

The term eGroups refers to a project-based online learning community involving students who have first language command of each other's learner language. Students are typically from different linguistic, cultural and possibly disciplinary backgrounds, and collaborate on a joint project. eGroups are conceptualised along the lines of telecollaboration (Belz, 2003; Hauck & Youngs, 2007; O'Dowd, 2006), a crucial component of online language learning (Thorne, 2005) which aims to foster intercultural competence in meaningful intercultural contexts. The eGroups approach was devised as a mechanism to promote authentic communication and meaningful, content-related language use in a cross-cultural setting. It draws on forms of open learning such as tandem-learning (Schwienhorst, 2003; Stickler & Lewis, 2008; Lewis & Walker, Eds., 2003), adopting learner reciprocity and collaborative autonomy as key principles aimed at joint knowledge construction in a group setting.

The project reported on in this paper brings together two distinct learning communities from two different tertiary institutions and learning modes, in different national and cultural contexts (New Zealand and Germany) and with different native and target languages as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: An international eGroups example



The study reported on here is based on action research carried out in May 2008 and involved students at a New Zealand and a German university. Participation was not compulsory and students were asked permission for data to be used. Extracts from the online discourse presented below includes pseudonyms to protect students' anonymity.

Benefits of technology-facilitated collaboration in eGroups

The benefits of collaboration for language learning have been widely recognised for language learning. From a constructivist perspective, learning involves purposeful and active construction of knowledge within a socio-cultural context of use (Lantolf

& Pavlenko, 2000; Norton, 2000). However, realistic interaction through sustained participation and collaboration is difficult to achieve in classroom-based learning, not to mention in distance learning contexts. Computer-Mediated Communication however offers new opportunities for increased participation (Hudson & Bruckman, 2002), communication outside class (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000) and development of cultural and pragmatic competence (Belz, 2003; Cohen, 2007). Yet, the benefits of technology-facilitated language learning are not automatic and studies have revealed that there is potential for cognitive overload (Chun & Plass, 2000), participation by students cannot be assumed (Wegerif, 1998:34) and miscommunication might occur (Belz, 2003; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006).

Nevertheless, a collaborative environment presents an opportunity to promote inquiry-based learning and increased cognitive engagement (Mangenot & Nissen, 2006), involving reflection and negotiation of meaning. Effective design of the online learning environment as well as appropriate teacher facilitation and scaffolding can enhance student-centred learning through increased interactivity, involving different stages (Salmon, 2002; 2004):

- beginning interactions, establishing an online identity and building online working relationships, a sense of 'we' as a community working towards common goals; feeling part of the group, mutual respect.
- information exchange, encountering diverse views and establishing common ground; stimulus for ideas and reflection; engaging with content and participants.
- knowledge construction through exploring issues, developing positions, reflection; joint writing: learners become online authors

Social presence manifests itself in different ways (Garrison et al., 2001). These include affective responses revealed through emotion, humour, or self-disclosure; interactive responses evident in acknowledgement of and response to contributions; as well as cohesive responses, which serve a phatic function and the development of group/partner dynamics to illustrate a 'we/us' commitment to a joint task.

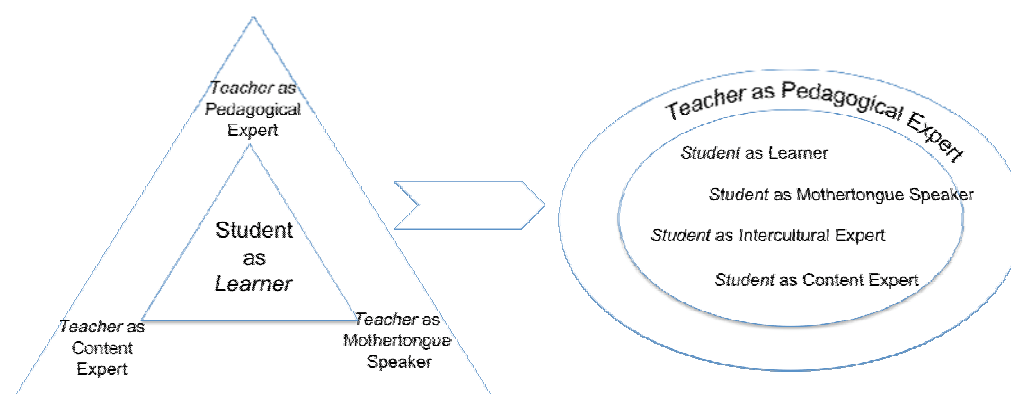
Against this background the e-Groups concept provides a computer-mediated learning environment, which serves to facilitate joint construction of knowledge and experiential learning. It combines principles of student-centred, content-based inquiry in a technology-rich environment. Learners are encouraged to act as mutual experts whereas teachers take on the role of facilitators, who scaffold and monitor the process, provide guidance and feedback. eGroups are typically project-based to foster authentic, meaningful and intellectually stimulating work on content which has direct relevance to the learners' worlds. This aligns eGroups well with a focus on content inquiry, with the aim to provide opportunities for peers to actively engage in intellectually stimulating exchanges where they:

- enact new discursive patterns and Target Language (TL) uses
- interact and engage with an unstructured but mutually relevant subject matter
- act as mutual experts in matters of language and culture

Shifting roles and responsibilities

Learners become active participants who explore knowledge in rich learning environments. This is a fundamental shift from transmission-based pedagogy to learner-centred approach to teaching and learning (Berghoff et al., 2000). Against this background, the roles of the students in eGroups were altered: making use of the bilingual presence of speakers of German and English allowed students to take over the part of the first-language speaker for their second-language speaker counterparts and vice versa. Since eGroups students also stem from a particular study background, we assumed they were both confident and capable of also taking over the roles of the expert in their individual subjects. Shifting the content-related responsibilities, thus, to the students, the pedagogical expert in turn could fully concentrate on creating a positive learning atmosphere and on focussing on the individual learners, i.e. by means of monitoring, feedback, or dynamising the activities online. Figure 2 illustrates the shift of learner and teacher roles.

Figure 2: Shift of learner and teacher roles and responsibilities in eGroups



Learners from different contexts can work towards common outcomes, despite potentially diverging curricular goals. For example, for there was an emphasis on academic language use and genres for students in Germany, requiring them to produce formal presentations based on data collection. For New Zealand students, participation and engagement on textbook-relevant issues were an expected outcome in themselves, and they completed a critical reflection report on conclusion of the

project. In the process both groups develop collaborative strategies, enabling them 'to pursue quite disparate objectives as individuals, yet to feel that each is contributing equally to the fulfilment of the partnership's aims, that is, taking part in a "fair deal exchange"' (Stickler & Lewis, 2008). This adds complexity with possibly positive implications since institutional, cultural and curricular differences mirror real-world diversity adding authenticity to the negotiating task.

In our project group, there were five students from New Zealand and 15 German students. They set up in five groups altogether each consisting of one student from New Zealand and from two to four German students. The reason why these groups were unequally set up was due to the students' wishes of working about a particular topic in their joint project work.

Negotiating topics and tasks within a theme

We chose a theme-based approach which would help create a focus on content and leave sufficient scope for students to develop their own topics within the thematic strands. It was important that the selected overarching theme would be of mutual relevance, for example: 'Globalisation and localisation: opportunities and challenges'. This theme was to serve as a vehicle to encourage students to generate their own topics through which to explore contemporary issues and concepts from cultural, social or environmental perspectives. Mutually relevant topic areas also helped to accommodate the respective curricular demands of the Social Sciences majors and an according need to apply theory in Germany as well as to cater to New Zealand students, whose textbook is content-based with a focus on contemporary issues. This approach provided a thematic platform for exposure to different views and in both target languages.

The topics for the collaborative project working phase were chosen within the thematic frame of globalisation and localisation. Five groups in total created one of the following working titles for their projects: Globalisation and localisation: Effects on the environment and environmental behaviour; effects on the consumption of food; effects on culture; effects on education; the tattoo as an example of globalised taste and local identity.

Intercultural learning

Online encounters have the potential to expose students to unfamiliar conceptual systems. They may facilitate development of cultural awareness (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002) and intercultural competence through interaction across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Baumann & Shelley, 2006; Belz, 2003). In eGroups, students from different cultural or national contexts work in small groups towards a common goal. While key parameters, such as the overarching theme or the application of a theory in the case of the German students, are set by the teachers, the students themselves

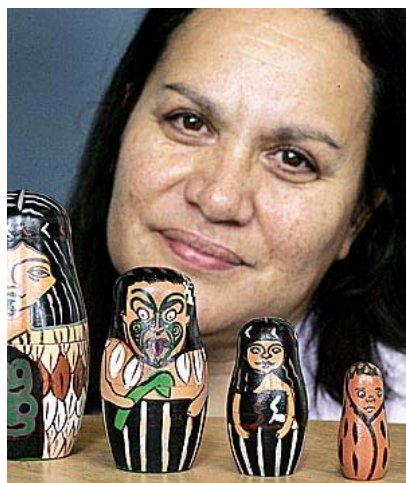
negotiate the process of defining their topics, identifying relevant questions and finding ways to answer them through collaborative autonomy. They are, thus, shaping their own learning. One of the key decisions the students had to make was the use and distribution of the two target languages; some groups decided to take turns from one day to the next, while others switched after a set period of time. In reality, there was also natural code-switching (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Natural code-switching in eGroups chat

	ENG	mix	GER
(1)	Opening: Holly & Jana		
(2)	ICC-wedding couple: URL, mail		
(3)	Sabine enters, Terminplanung mit Doodle		
(4)	Task-definition		
(5)	activities until next meeting		
(6)	jobs & activities		
(7)	Terminvereinbarung(en), Jana leaves chatroom		
(8)	private-chat: language learning, reading books		

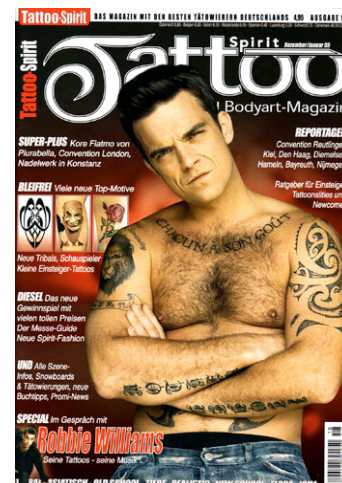
To spark the students' initial interest and curiosity, they were presented with readings and media reports on contemporary issues with both global and local significance (see Figure 4). The exposure of cultural traditions to global, commercial forces, for example, served as springboard for reflection and developing critical questions, which helped raise awareness of each other's perspectives. For instance, German students became aware of the cultural meanings Maori tattoos have in the New Zealand context, while the New Zealand students came to understand the role of tattoos as mere fashion accessories in Germany. Maori Russian dolls sparked thinking on both sides about the impact of globalisation on culture: appropriation of cultural symbols - mutual enrichment or sell-out for economic gain?

Figure 4: Examples of media reports to stimulate reading and reflection



Maori Russian dolls made in China, sold in NZ
The Dominion Post, 12 April 2008

Robbie Williams Tattoo Bekenntnisse
(Robbie Williams' Tattoo Admissions)
Body Art Magazin 5 December 2007



This approach is not completely hands-off but presents the students with a mix of structure and choice. Teachers scaffold a process reflection.

Technology-facilitated exchanges

Various types of tools were assigned to serve different purposes and to promote mutual engagement. Students were required to navigate two learning platforms in order to access the full range of tools, including the regular use of both open and private discussion boards, and wikis on the one platform, and live audiographic conferencing tools supporting chat and voice on the other platform. The live conferencing tools were recommended for initial meetings where students got to know each other and were able to both speak and write synchronously. An example of the dual nature of the audiographic communication tool is given below [Figure 5], showing simultaneous written chat and oral communication (represented in speech bubbles), with each medium complementing the other. Asynchronous tools served information exchanges, and wikis were used for joint constructions of text.

Negotiating the task and identifying key concepts

Target-orientation and key concept definition

The students revealed a target-oriented, autonomous collaboration in which both joint definition and agreement of the common goal as well as the organisation on a meta-level for jointly reaching the target, is of utmost importance. These steps are in line with Salmon's (2004) three key steps in her model of online interaction stressing

the building of online relationships, online socialisation and information exchange. The following examples underline these steps:

Holly: I just thought about the problem how **we** want to integrate the aspect of 'opportunities and challenges' in our project? Or do **we** want to figure out the relationship between NZ and Germany and illustrate opportunities and challenges in this special case....?

This extract stresses the target-orientation on a content level, reflecting the students jointly defining the task and agreeing on its meaning. It also illustrates an emerging sense of group orientation, expressed through the inclusive plural 'we' as well as Holly's consultative approach. The target-orientation can also be observed on an organisational level. The students jointly and actively agree on tasks, time-lines and partial steps:

Jana: So, **our** task today is maybe anyway to try to define steps, too, as it was indicated at **your** ehm thread, **Sabine**. Just eh... **We** all did some research on the internet and maybe **we** could try to clear out some questions or some structure of **our** presentation which **we** have to hold on In June, June, **we** have to hold our presentation in June.

The example underlines again the importance of reaching a common target in the group. The student discourse suggests a clear 'sense of community' (Salmon 2004) evident in referrals to the content produced by another group member and also to the research already carried out by each individual group member. By using particles like *maybe* or the conditional form *we could*, mutual respect becomes clear. Autonomous collaboration (Garrison et al., 2001) is also evident in the students' breaking down the tasks and the suggestion of further steps with reference to the deadline in order to reach the common goal in a structured way.

Negotiation of meaning

Meaningful and joint construction of knowledge is one of the core elements of eGroups. The following example illustrates this process in which joint communication about mental models and meanings has evoked a better understanding of a concept, which has a direct relevance to the student's world.

Holly: Getting an idea of what people think globalisation is might be a good place to start?

Sabine: Yes of course,

Holly: thank you.

Holly: I mean, not very long ago I thought it meant McDonalds...

Although 'globalisation' is a commonly used concept, Holly is aware that for this academic task a more detailed and intellectual definition is required. The example stresses that the student has gained knowledge on a more precise level through online collaboration.

The joint construction of knowledge on a subject-related and academic level reaches an interesting level when students take over the roles of (mutual) experts.

Jana: Of course we'll ask them how many and which kind of other Germans/kiwis they know in the 'diaspora'

Holly: What on earth is a diaspora?

Jana: It's a scattered people

Sabine: who have still contact to each other....

Holly: Like people from one country living in another, who have meetings together.

Sabine: and have a '(ethnische) Identität'

Sabine: yes, you get it

Jana: or organize completely new in their local environment, that depends

Holly: Thanks

Sabine: ääh got

Holly: Jep :-)))

In this example the German students take over the roles as experts in that they use a term (in English) from the Social Sciences, which does not seem to be part of Holly's everyday English language. In imperfect English, the German students try to explain the meaning of the English word. They perform the role of the subject-expert. The New Zealand student likewise transforms into the expert of the English language by paraphrasing the meaning of the new term in correct English so as to ensure their own but also mutual understanding.

In eGroups, however, not only peer-feedback but also intellectually stimulating joint knowledge construction takes place. The following example shows how the group tries to come to a common definition of the meaning of culture by developing a train of thoughts and logically discussing it.

Sabine: in a globalised world many cultures or local communities sell their typical 'culture stuff'. I don't know how to call it exactly....

Jana: so we come finally back to the question, what 'culture' might be

Sabine: yes or what people think it is....when they come somewhere and want to see, buy or experience something typically mmmhh. yes but we can also think culture got another meaning through globalization, through 'Kommerz'

(...)

Holly: because now cultures around the world are picking up bits and pieces from other cultures

Sabine: and also often sell their own.

Jana: I'm not sure if you can sell culture out. Culture is what people do, isn't it?

Holly: Yes. There's a lot of Maori-based stuff on sale here. You can't sell culture, but you can sell its symbols....

Holly: I think it's better for a culture to exploit itself than for another culture to steal its symbols and do it for them... At least that way, they're *choosing* to do it!

This dialogue reveals a complex and detailed discussion about a central concept ('So we finally come back to the question, what culture might be') in which students interact and engage with the unstructured everyday concept of culture. Trying to find common ground for a group definition ('Culture is what people do, isn't it?') stimulates the negotiation of meaning ('I'm not sure if you can sell culture out.') in a joint developing train of thought ('Holly: Cultures around the world are picking up bits and pieces. - Sabine: 'and often sell their own'). This step corresponds to Salmon's (2004) highest stage in the interaction framework.

It is also interesting to note that Holly, who at the start of the collaboration appeared to have a fairly superficial view of what constitutes (Kiwi) culture, now makes some quite profound observations about the exploitation of culture in a global context.

Focus on form: Language feedback

Students were encouraged to give each other occasional feedback on the use of target languages, including grammar, vocabulary and, where appropriate, matters of style. Students were to draw on their native speaker or near-native speaker knowledge to provide assistance, but as the exchange below shows, being a first language speaker/user does not guarantee knowledge about the language by default. Even though Holly is unable to articulate as a rule what she describes by way of example, Sabine is able to deduce one for herself and seek confirmation from Holly. The exchange exemplifies a micro instance of students working towards jointly constructed understanding, instead of relying on one-way instruction by an expert. Despite Holly's suggestion that the teacher would be better placed to answer the question, Sabine desists and continues to engage with the New Zealand partner.

Sabine: what is the difference between 'have to' and need to' then? Thanks ;-) when do I use what?

Holly: You 'have to' speak English to a person who only speaks English. You 'need to' practice English to speak it well. I'm sorry - i'm not very good at explaining.

Holly: Maybe Christina [course tutor] would be a better person to ask this question.

Sabine: ok, so you use 'have to' when there is no other choice, right?

Holly: Yes.

Sabine: something like a force.....

Sabine: ok, I think I got it.....

Holly: Yes, exactly. Thank you for putting it in words!

Sabine: ohh, you're welcome....;-)

Both students also employ considerable social skill by showing their gratitude to each other. Sabine thanks Holly in advance, reinforcing her friendly appreciation via an emoticon (the chat function did not have pre-designed emoticons and some students made a point of typing theirs, where possible, e.g. a smile). Her response to Holly's expression of gratitude shows her awareness of the appropriate pragmatics, though they seem almost tongue in cheek given the unexpected role reversal. But moderating her statement with a smile avoids potential misunderstanding. The lack of paralinguistic means was at times a source of frustration to her:

Sabine: ahhy I miss the smlilies in this chatroom :-(

I can't produce any [emoticons].....

Developing good working relationships and mutual respect became very important for the functioning of the groups. Because the students had to do without non-linguistic clues such as facial expressions in the chat function, they also had to deal with increased potential for miscommunication.

Intercultural awareness and interactive competence

In addition to assisting each other with their mutual target languages, the students were also expected to explore their cultural backgrounds together. But being a cultural expert is not a given, simply by virtue of being a member of a particular community. In fact, as the following example shows, conceptualisations of what constitutes someone's native culture can be quite superficial and limited to tangible artefacts or practices. The New Zealand student, Holly, seems to be aware of that herself and explicitly desists from having authoritative knowledge:

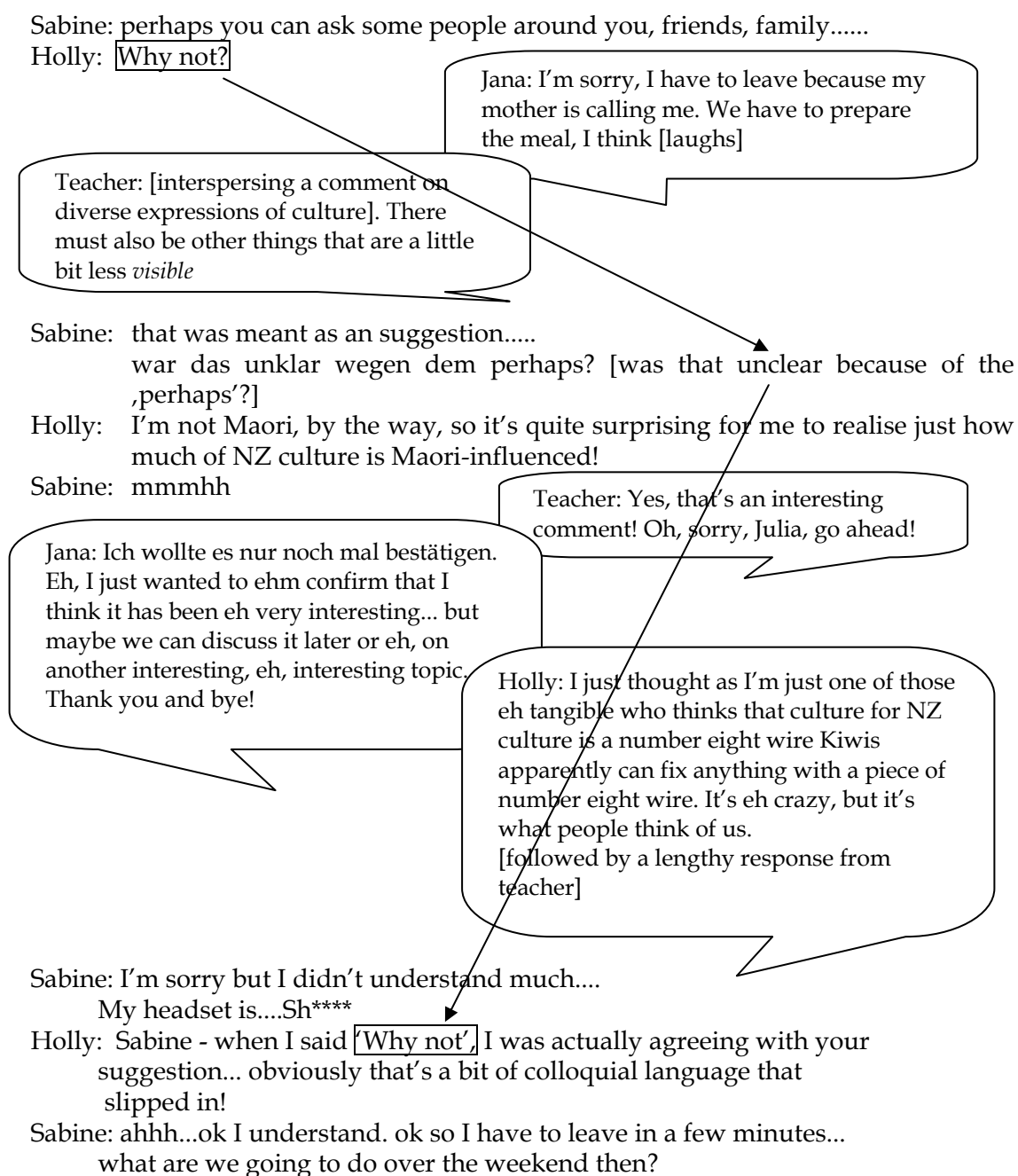
Holly: Without Maori culture, we have the kiwi, a lot of sheep, beer, um...

Sabine: that's very interesting to know

Holly: **Don't take me as an authority** on this! [our emphasis]

The continuation of this conversation is shown in Figure 5, starting with Sabine's suggestion to consult with others in the target culture, taking the pressure off Holly. Given the complexity of the live conferences, which weave together written chat and spoken discourse, the students show remarkable skill in listening to each other, trying not to offend, getting their point across or repairing miscommunication. The exchange shown in Figure 5 illustrates how an unintended question mark in the chat ("*why not?*") appears to mask Holly's agreement with the suggestion made by Sabine. Despite other things going on in the conversation, with other participants

Figure 5: Repairing miscommunication in an audiographic exchange combining chat and oral comments (in speech bubbles)



talking using the voice function, Sabine follows up on Holly's apparent question, suggesting that she might have been too vague herself. This prompts Holly to confirm her intended meaning as agreement with Sabine's original suggestion. Holly too takes responsibility for the misunderstanding by 'blaming' her use of 'colloquial language' as something her partner might not be familiar with. Although it is the inadvertent use of the question mark in the chat which is to blame, the exchange is testament to the students' emerging pragmatic awareness and social competence.

Repeated interactions involving cultural comparisons and the need to articulate concepts or practices to others provided students with a chance to develop insights into their own culture:

I'm not Maori, by the way, so it's quite surprising for me to **realise** just how much of NZ culture is Maori-influenced

Taking (articulating) and defending a position – content focus

Beyond the general discussions on culture at the early stage, students began to compare and contrast the target cultures in relation to the chosen group topic. Inspired by readings and shared information, students began to reflect critically on what they found and articulated their positions. This example is taken from a group which chose to explore globalisation from an environmental perspective. In the process, the two German students formed a critical awareness of an apparent contradiction between New Zealand's clean and green image and its environmental record:

Corinna: I was surprised to read that Kiwis don't care about their environment! Since New Zealand has the image 'clean and green' could it be that they are taking it for granted? ... This would be an interesting topic to discuss.

Karin: I was also kind of shocked to hear about their big problem with a high level of pollution. The statistics have nothing in common with the images of New Zealand. ...

These views were supported by a New Zealand student, who criticised New Zealanders' careless attitudes. Another New Zealand student challenged this stance by cautioning against generalisations and speculating about the reliability of information used to form an opinion:

Kate: I don't think it's good to generalize. Not all New Zealanders 'don't give a stuff' about the environment. It makes me wonder what facts some articles are based on, and perhaps who was funding it? Is it an accurate depiction? Where is the proof to substantiate all this, and what tests are the results based on? There are people without concerns for the environment in every country, just as there are

caring people in every country that are concerned and actively do their best to care for the environment.

Kate's reference to how information is interpreted and used is directly relevant to the academic practices the German students in particular were expected to engage in, via the target language. The ability to synthesise and analyse information would furthermore be crucial for a topic-related empirical data collection, which the New Zealand students assisted their German partners with. This type of exchange represents an important step towards developing a critical perspective, becoming self-reflective, and building on common tasks towards learning to articulate and defend positions. This corresponds to Salmon's stage 5 and is referred to as an important step towards the ability of life-long learning.

Conclusion

With this paper we presented the eGroups concept, which aims at integrating content-based language learning and intercultural learning through international online collaboration in the tertiary context. It was conceptualised as a content-based instructional approach devised to foster interaction, cognitive engagement and critical reflection through collaboration and intercultural exchanges. Our observations suggest that the eGroups approach provides an opportunity for meaningful and authentic interaction across cultural and linguistic boundaries. It creates a collaborative learning space which encourages students to enact and validate their online social presence in both their native and target language. Collaborative group work was shown to foster social presence at different stages (Salmon, 2004). Learners negotiated and helped shape the topic as well as the process, giving them an opportunity to exercise collaborative control (Anderson & Garrison, 1998).

Bringing together learners from different cultural contexts (New Zealand and Germany) and with different target languages (German and English) provided cultural exposure which neither group of students would normally have had. This also introduced additional complexities mirroring real-life demands. The eGroups examples given here are limited to two groups of students (Holly, Jana and Sabine; and Kate, Corinna, and Karin) and one teacher (Christina). While the small sample and action research approach are a clear limitation, the data presented here illustrate the kind of discourse generated during the collaboration. This was characterised by learner interaction, negotiation of meaning and joint knowledge construction. It is important to note too that not all students participated equally and that there were different levels of investment by individual learners. However, learning in an open structure provides choice and a basis for developing learner autonomy. Groups which were actively engaged provided evidence of socially meaningful interaction marked by attending, listening and engaging with each other and the content. A

more in-depth study of the differences in uptake, participation and investment between learners was beyond the framework of this project, but presents an opportunity for future research.

Collaboration is inherently complex and can be messy, but this also reflects real life. As such it has the potential for conflict and miscommunication, as observed elsewhere (Belz, 2003; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006) as well as mutual enrichment and development of communicative, interactive and intercultural competence. It is the interplay of real-life challenges, interactivity and engagement through content-related language which makes the eGroups model a useful model for learning environments emphasising constructive and collaborative approaches.

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